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ABSTRACT

An evaluation of the effectiveness of charter schools is offered in this report. The report attempts to answer three critical questions: (1) "How are charter schools assessing student achievement?"; (2) "What are charter schools doing to meet accountability requirements?"; and (3) "Are charter schools improving student achievement?" To answer these questions, it draws on data gathered from 31 charter schools in 8 states. It found that charters use a variety of measures to assess student achievement, such as standardized tests, student portfolios, and teacher evaluations. In addition to student achievement, accountability plans include areas such as student behavior and attitudes, staff development, parental involvement and satisfaction, school climate, fiscal management, and program activities. Charter schools and their sponsors share responsibility for a reliable, valid assessment, and in most cases, this responsibility has been carefully fulfilled. Information on the case studies under examination, evaluation methods, accountability plans, and evidence of success are all covered in the text. The report concludes that charter schools can improve the achievement of both inner city and rural students. (RJM)

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Making a Difference?

Charter Schools, Evaluation and Student Performance

by

Stella Cheung, Mary Ellen Murphy and Joe Nathan

March, 1998

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report attempts to help answer three critical questions people are asking about charter schools: 1) How are charter schools assessing student achievement? 2) What are charter schools doing to meet accountability requirements? 3) Are charter schools improving student achievement? This report is not definitive. However, it is possible to begin answering important questions about student achievement. The answers in this report come from 31 charter schools in eight states (Arizona, California, Colorado, Georgia, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, and Texas). This study found that

- Contracts have been renewed for several charters because of evidence that the schools improved student achievement. These charters are in California, Colorado, and Minnesota.
- Charters use a variety of measures to assess student achievement. The most frequently cited combinations are standardized tests, student portfolios, and teacher evaluations.
- In addition to student achievement, accountability plans include areas such as student behavior and attitudes, staff development, parental involvement and satisfaction, school climate, fiscal management, and program activities.
- The charter school and its sponsor share responsibility for a reliable, valid assessment. In most of the charters, but not all, this responsibility had been carried out well.
- Charters are showing that they can improve student achievement. This report cites 21 charter schools which have improved achievement including:

Fenton Avenue Charter School in Lake View Terrace, California enrolls 1295 students, 97.5 percent are students of color, and over 95 percent qualify for free and reduced lunch. One of its initial goals was to raise reading, math, and language scores by at least five percentile points. This goal has been accomplished in many grades and subjects.

New Visions School in Minneapolis, Minnesota serves 180 inner city students, many who had individual education plans and behavioral problems in previous schools. Over the last five years, students have gained more than one year of academic growth per year on average as measured by two different norm-referenced tests.

SABIS International Charter School was one of the lowest performing schools in Springfield, Massachusetts. Sixty-two percent of the students scored below grade level when the school opened in 1995. At the close of the second year, 62 percent of the students tested at or above grade level.

West Houston Charter School serves 120 students, 41 percent of the students are classified as "at risk", and 37 percent are identified as Special Education. Results from the Wide Range Achievement Test – Third Edition administered in the beginning and at the end of the 1996-97 school year show that 89 percent of the students gained at least one year of academic growth.

Is it possible for charters to improve achievement of students from low income or limited English speaking families? The results from these schools suggest that the answer is "yes."

INTRODUCTION

The first charter school opened in 1992 in Minnesota. Currently, more than 800 charter schools are operating in 29 states and the District of Columbia with more than 170,000 students enrolled. President Bill Clinton has proposed that more than 3,000 charter schools will be in operation by the year 2000. In addition, he suggested that every school either be a charter or have charter like responsibilities¹. The concept of charter schools is a growing reform strategy in the American education system.

The Charter School Concept

The charter school movement brings together four powerful concepts: freedom and choice for families and their children, entrepreneurial opportunities for educators and parents, explicit responsibility for improved achievement, and competition for public school districts. Charter advocates believe that poverty, racism, and violence must be addressed. They also suggest that problems outside schools should not be used to excuse problems inside schools. Here are the key elements of the charter idea.

1. *The state will authorize more than one organization to start and operate a charter school in the community.* The organizers – usually teachers, parents, or community members – could approach either a local board or some other public body to be their sponsor. People would be free to go to any of several places to obtain supervision and sponsorship.
2. *The newly organized (or converted) schools would be public schools.* They would be nonsectarian, and they would not charge tuition. They would be open to all kinds of students, and they would not be allowed to have admissions tests of any kind. They would, however, be required to follow all health and safety regulations.
3. *The schools would be responsible for improved student achievement.* Typically, each school would negotiate a three to five year contract (or “charter”) with the sponsoring agency, specifying areas in which students would learn more and how that learning would be measured. Schools that failed to achieve their contracted improvements would be closed by the sponsoring organization.
4. *In return for this accountability for improved results, the state would grant an up-front waiver of virtually all rules and regulations governing public schools.* Aside from health, safety, and other regulations mentioned above, schools would be exempt from state regulations about how to operate.
5. *The charter school would be a school of choice.* It would be actively selected by the educators who work there and by the families whose children attend it. No one would be assigned to work at or to attend the school who had not chosen to do so.

6. *The school would be a discrete entity.* Founders could choose any organization available under state laws. The school would be a legal entity, with its own elected board. Teachers could organize and bargain collectively. However, this bargaining unit would be separate from, and not bound by, the contracts negotiated by any district bargaining unit.
7. *The full per-pupil allocation would move with the student.* This amount would be roughly equal to the average state per-pupil allocation or the average allocation for the district from which the student comes. If the state provides extra funds for students with disabilities or for students from low-income families, these funds would also follow the student.
8. *Participating teachers would be protected and given new opportunities.* The state would permit teachers to take a leave from their public school systems and retain their seniority. Teachers could stay in local or state retirement systems. Teachers could choose to be employees, to organize a cooperative, or to choose another method of organization available to nonsectarian groups².

Important differences exist between the charter, magnet, and voucher ideas. Unlike schools in many voucher proposals, charter schools must be non-sectarian and may not charge tuition beyond what the state provides. The charter idea insists that schools not be allowed to use any form of admissions test. This is quite different from magnets or vouchers. According to a major federal study, more than 50 percent of secondary magnets and about 25 percent of elementary magnets have admissions tests³. In addition, charter schools are explicitly responsible for improved student performance. This is not true for magnet schools or for schools participating in a voucher program. Because admissions tests are prohibited and accountability for results is demanded, the charter idea is a controlled, not an unlimited, choice plan.

Part of the charter idea is to give educators and parents the opportunity to create the kind of school they believe really does make sense for students, as long as the educators will take responsibility for improved student performance. The charter school idea also encourages existing schools and districts to rethink what they are doing. Researching this impact is beyond the scope of this report.

As this report was being prepared, one of the authors (Nathan) served on a panel with Dr. Kent Matheson, Superintendent of the Flagstaff, Arizona, School District. Dr. Matheson has been president of the Washington State Superintendents Association and Washington State Superintendent of the Year. Matheson noted that he was not in favor of charter legislation when it was adopted in Arizona. However, he noted that "I have a completely different attitude now." Matheson told a group of Idaho school administrators that the Flagstaff district had responded in numerous ways to the creation of charters in the area. The district created a new full day kindergarten program, made a conscious decision to "make parents feel more welcome," created a new magnet middle school, modified the calendar in two elementary schools (making them year round programs), and increased involvement of business and community people in the schools. It invited business people to interview high school seniors and learn more about their programs.

Matheson was asked if the district would have done these things if Arizona had not passed a charter law. "Probably not," he answered; "and certainly not as fast as we did⁴." Flagstaff is only one community. It is much too early to tell if charters will have this impact throughout the country. As noted, such research is beyond the scope of this report. Part of the idea of charters is to help young people who attend charter schools and also help encourage the kind of improvements the Flagstaff superintendent cited.

The Present Study

Student assessment is one of the most important issues facing the charter school movement. One of the key features of the movement is that the schools are responsible for improved student achievement. We hope this study will provide answers to the following research questions: 1) How are charter schools measuring student achievement? 2) What are charter schools doing to meet accountability requirements? 3) Do charter schools have an impact on student achievement? The report will describe the sample, address the three research questions posed above, and make recommendations based on these results as well as input from charter school leaders and accountability "experts."

METHODS

In October 1997, the Center for School Change mailed a questionnaire to state department officials in nine states (Arizona, California, Colorado, Georgia, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, New Mexico, and Texas). These states were selected to represent a variety of geographic regions, year the law was passed, and extent of charter activity in each state. The officials were asked to nominate three to five charter schools in their state that have a well-developed evaluation system and have been successful in improving student achievement (see appendix A). Thus, this study concentrated on the "best" practices.

A total of 31 charter schools were nominated (four schools from Arizona, five from California, five from Colorado, three from Georgia, four from Massachusetts, three from Michigan, four from Minnesota, none from New Mexico, and three from Texas). Each of these schools received a letter briefly explaining the study. The letter included a date and time when we would contact them for a telephone interview (see appendix B). Thirty charter school directors were interviewed and only one declined. The school that declined an interview, however, did mail pertinent information that was included in this study. All interviews were conducted in late October, November, and early December of 1997.

Charter school directors were asked three questions: 1) What evaluation methods does your charter use to measure student success in academic areas? 2) What additional methods might be useful in measuring student achievement? 3) What other areas do you want to measure but haven't found an appropriate or effective way to measure? They were also asked to send us a copy of their evaluation methods and any annual/evaluation report(s) they have produced. The interviews were approximately 10 minutes in length.

LIMITATIONS

The results are limited by the nature of our sample and by the amount and type of questions asked during the phone interviews. Additional questions could have obtained other important information about the school's overall performance. We received formal annual/evaluation reports from 19 schools. We received other information from schools that did not send us a copy of their annual/evaluation reports. Over half (58 percent) of the sample have less than two years of data. The results of this report reflect information based on the interviews, formal annual/evaluation reports, and/or other information provided by charter school operators.

THE SAMPLE

- Seven of the 31 schools (23 percent) had their initial contract renewed by their sponsors (Figure 1). These charters are in California, Colorado, and Minnesota. Most schools will be preparing to renew their charter within the next few years, with the exception of charters in Arizona, which are not up for renewal until the year 2010.

Figure 1: Year initial contract was renewed

City Academy	1995
Academy Charter School	1996
Bowling Green Elementary	1996
Core Knowledge Charter School	1997
Pueblo School for the Arts and Sciences	1997
Minnesota New Country	1997
New Visions School	1997

- Of the 31 schools, one opened in fall of 1992, two in 1993, seven in 1994, 13 in 1995, and eight in 1996.
- About three-fourths (74 percent) of charters in the sample were newly created schools. Eight schools (Addison Elementary, Bowling Green Elementary, Charles Ellis Montessori Academy, Fenton Avenue, Midway Elementary, New Visions, Open Charter School, and SABIS International Charter School) had converted to charter status. These schools are in California, Georgia, Massachusetts, and Minnesota.
- Approximately two-thirds of charters in the sample serve elementary and junior high students; one-third serve high school or older students. Eleven charters serve grades pre-K-6, K-5, or K-6; 10 serve K-7, K-8, K-9, or 7-9; six serve 8-11, 6-12, 7-11, 7-12, or 9-12; two serve K-12; and two serve students between the ages of 14-19 or 16-21.
- Nearly half (48 percent) of the sample enroll less than 300 students. The largest enrollment is 1294 students and the smallest is 60 students.
- Twelve of the 31 schools have over 50 percent of students of color. The average percentage of students of color is 37 percent.
- Five schools in the sample (Excel Charter Academy, Roosevelt – Edison Charter School, Minnesota New Country, SABIS International Charter School, and Vanguard Charter Academy) have contracts with for-profit organizations that manage the educational and business affairs.

1. How are charter schools measuring student achievement?

These "successful" charters are using both standardized tests and performance-based assessments (i.e. teacher evaluations, student portfolios, and student presentations) to measure student achievement. All charters employed at least two different methods. The majority of the schools (77 percent) used three or four different methods to assess student achievement. The most frequently cited combinations are standardized tests, teacher evaluations, and student portfolios. The category "other" refers to publisher tests and in-house/teacher made tests. Figure 2 provides an overview of the methods used by the 31 schools in this study.

Figure 2: Overview of Assessment Methods

Charter Schools	Standardized Tests	Teacher Evaluations	Student Portfolios	Student Presentations	Other
Academy Charter School	X		X		
Addison Elementary School	X	X		X	
Anzona School for the Arts	X	X	X	X	
Benjamin Franklin Charter School	X	X	X	X	X
Bowling Green Elementary	X	X	X		X
Charles Ellis Montessori Academy	X	X	X		
Cherry Creek Academy	X				X
City Academy	X	X	X		
City on a Hill Charter School	X	X		X	X
Community Day Charter School	X	X	X		X
Community of Peace Academy	X	X	X		X
Core Knowledge Charter School	X	X		X	
Excel Charter Academy	X	X		X	
Fenton Avenue Charter School	X	X	X		X
Flagstaff Arts & Leadership Academy	X	X	X	X	
Heritage Academy	X		X		
Kern Workforce 2000 Academy	X		X		
Midland Academy	X	X	X	X	
Midway Elementary	X	X	X		
Minnesota New Country	X	X	X	X	X
New Visions School	X				X
Open Charter School	X		X	X	
Pueblo School for the Arts & Sciences	X	X	X	X	X
Renaissance Charter School	X	X			
Roosevelt-Edison Charter School	X	X	X		X
SABIS International Charter School	X	X			X
Seashore Learning Center	X	X	X	X	
Sequoia School	X	X	X		
Sonoma Valley Charter School	X	X	X	X	
Vanguard Charter Academy	X	X			
West Houston Charter School	X	X	X		
Totals	31	25	22	13	12

Standardized Tests

All charters use some form of standardized tests. The majority (68 percent) of charters are using at least two different standardized tests to measure student achievement. The most frequently used standardized tests are the Stanford Achievement Test – Ninth Edition and the IOWA Tests of Basic Skills (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Number of Charter Schools Using the Following Standardized Tests



Today, many different tests (norm-referenced tests and criterion-referenced tests) are available to measure student achievement. Figure 4 contains a brief description of the standardized tests used most frequently by the charter schools in the sample.

Figure 4: Standardized Tests

Name of Standardized Test	Grades	Subjects
<i>IOWA Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS)</i>	K-9	Mathematics, reading, vocabulary, writing, listening, methods of studying, science, and social studies
<i>Metropolitan Achievement Test - Seventh Edition (MAT 7)</i>	K-12	Mathematics, reading, language, science, and social studies
<i>Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP)</i>	4, 5, 7, 8	MEAP Essential Skills mathematics and reading for 4 th and 7 th graders; MEAP writing and science for 5 th and 8 th graders
<i>Stanford Achievement Test - Ninth Edition (Stanford 9)</i>	K-12	Mathematics, reading, language/writing, science, and social studies
<i>TERRANOVA</i>	K-12	Mathematics, reading/language arts, science, and social studies

Performance-based Measures

The majority of charter schools (77 percent) are using a variety of measures in addition to standardized tests to assess student achievement. The most common types of performance-based measures are teacher evaluations, student portfolios, and student presentations (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Percent of charters using teacher evaluations, student portfolios, and student presentations

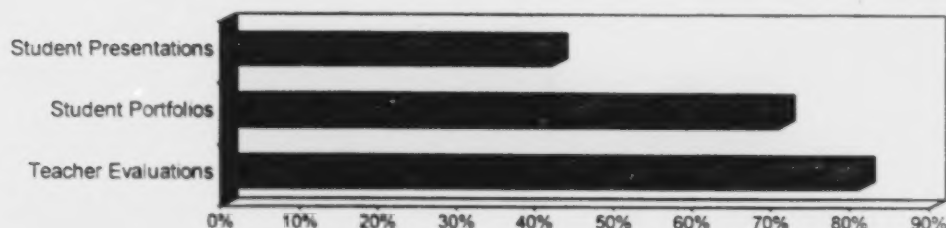


Figure 6 describes the three most common types of performance-based measures.

Figure 6: Performance-based measures

Measure	Characteristics	Examples
STUDENT PRESENTATIONS	Aim to develop student aptitude in oral/written skills, as well as self-confidence to creatively discuss a topic. This can be in the form of an oral or written presentation of a book, a scientific project, or a community service project.	Students at Midland Academy of Advanced and Creative Studies in Michigan develop a variety of valuable skills through student-led conferences. Students design and send conference invitations to their parents, then prepare their portfolios for presentation.
STUDENT PORTFOLIOS	Are intended to demonstrate a wide range of student work over time. Portfolios can contain many things, including complex and multi-dimensional tasks. Today, many different types of software such as ClarisWorks, HyperCard, and HyperStudio are available to create multimedia portfolios. These software programs allow text, graphics, sound, and video to be stored digitally.	Students at Open Charter School in California use electronic and/or video portfolios to show their work. Electronic portfolios allow students to scan samples of their work into the computer and video portfolios allow students to describe the project they are working on by asking themselves three basic questions: 1) What did they do? 2) What did they learn? 3) How can they use this knowledge?
TEACHER EVALUATIONS	Can take many forms including the use of observations, comprehensive rating scales, checklists, narratives, and written and oral reports.	Teachers at Arizona School for the Arts write a one to two page narrative on each student.

2. What are charter schools doing to meet accountability requirements?

Accountability/annual reports were submitted by 19 of 31 studied charter schools. Below are several observations based on the provided descriptions.

1. The format of the models are generally consistent: the goals are listed, followed by the evaluation methods used to determine if the goal has been accomplished.
2. The number of goals range from 19 to three, with most having seven.
3. Many of the plans relate the goals to the school's mission, directly connecting the evaluation to the school's overall direction and vision. For example, Benjamin Franklin Classical Charter School in Franklin, Massachusetts centered its goals around four primary areas of the school's mission: 1) classical curriculum developed by the Core Knowledge Foundation; 2) character education as enumerated in the nine cardinal virtues; 3) community service; and 4) parents as the primary educators of their children.
4. Most schools rely on several ways or measures to evaluate the achievement of the goal. SABIS International Charter School, for instance, uses the IOWA Tests of Basic Skills, Academic Monitoring System Tests, Continuous Assessment Tests, report cards, interim reports, and finals to evaluate its goal: "90 percent of students will achieve 80 percent mastery of grade level curriculum in five years."
5. A common goal of these schools was to score at or above the national averages on standardized tests and to make at least a one year academic gain per year. One of Core Knowledge Charter School's goals was to have "over 80 percent of grades three, six, and eight score at or above satisfactory on the TERRA NOVA test."
6. In addition to student achievement, accountability plans include areas such as student behavior and attitudes, staff development, parental involvement and satisfaction, school climate, fiscal management, and program activities. Below are several examples:
 - "Students will work cooperatively with others and develop appropriate social skills which enable them to be productive citizens with a sense of civic responsibility and privilege in our democratic, cultural diverse society" (Addison Elementary School).
 - The school will "develop facilities and a campus for a K-8 school" (Community Day Charter School).
 - "To empower parents and students with the decision-making process regarding the operation, administration, and management" of the school (Flagstaff Arts and Leadership Academy).

- "To serve at-risk students and provide them with a safe secure environment for learning" (New Visions School).
7. Several schools identify specific program goals for which the school will be held accountable. Other schools direct their goals toward the student, parent, or teacher. Without program goals, the responsibility is subtly shifted away from the school and toward the student, parent, or teacher.

The goals listed below demonstrate several ways schools are holding themselves directly responsible for student achievement.

- "One-hundred percent of eighth grade students will go on to high school ninth grade classes" (Academy Charter School).
- "Ninety-eight percent of Pueblo School for the Arts and Sciences families will volunteer at least 18 hours per year to the school" (Pueblo School for the Arts and Sciences).
- "Ninety-seven percent of all students will demonstrate one-year of academic growth" (West Houston Charter School).

Many charters review their goals and methods of assessment periodically and welcome recommendations for positive changes. During the interviews, many charter educators expressed an interest in finding reliable methods to measure character education, community and leadership development, Core Knowledge content, creativity, school climate, and graduation outcomes.

The specific requirements for establishing and running a charter school vary among states. The charter school and the sponsor benefit when they both develop and monitor the accountability plan. Tension about charter renewal is reduced for the charter school when the sponsor has contributed to the development and agreed to the indicators of the school's success. The sponsor becomes familiar with the charter's educational philosophy and practices as it helps develop the plan and later reviews the school's data. An opportunity for collaboration and sharing "best practices" also increases. The sponsor is more likely to adopt successful practices when it sees first hand the results of the charter's educational practices.

3. Are charter schools improving student achievement?

Many people around the country have asked if there are examples of charter schools that have improved student achievement. The answer is "yes." Twenty-one charter schools (68 percent) in the sample have administered at least two rounds of the same test and appeared to be making academic gains. These schools use a variety of ways to measure student gains on standardized achievement tests. Some schools report the average number of years gained, others report the national percentile rank, and still others report the normal curve equivalency scores. Many schools compare the progress of the same student from year to year. Others note the progress of all students, combining new students with students from previous years. In most cases, gains are reported with little regard for standard deviation. The strengths and weaknesses of the various measures must be considered when judging the adequacy of the gains.

The results cited come directly from the annual/evaluation reports and other information provided by charter school operators. The success of the 21 schools is described below in alphabetical order.

Academy Charter School in Castle Rock received the Colorado Board of Education's "John J. Irwin School of Excellence" award two years in a row and had its initial contract renewed in 1996. The school serves 320 students in kindergarten through eighth grade, 7.5 percent are students of color, and eight percent qualify for free and reduced lunch. The results of the 1996 Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP) show that 72 percent of fourth grade students scored at proficient level in math as compared to 59 percent in 1994. Seventy-seven percent of seventh grade students scored at proficient level in reading as compared to 53 percent in 1994⁵.

Addison Elementary School in Marietta, Georgia enrolls 700 students in kindergarten through fifth grade and 15 percent are students of color. Longitudinal data from the IOWA Tests of Basic Skills administered in Fall of 1995, 1996, and 1997 show that students made an average gain of 1.35 years per year in all subject areas⁶.

Benjamin Franklin Classical Charter School in Franklin, Massachusetts enrolls 255 students in kindergarten through sixth grade and one percent are students of color. Second and fourth grade students increased more than one grade level in the five months between the pre and post California Achievement Test of Basic Skills - Fifth Series administered in Fall of 1995 and Spring of 1996⁷.

Before converting to charter status, **Bowling Green Elementary** was one of the most troubled schools in the Sacramento City District, ranking among the bottom three schools in 1990. Seven years later, Bowling Green has improved to be among the "top half" of schools (in a district with 60 elementary schools) as measured by the IOWA Tests of Basic Skills. The school enrolls 750 students in pre-kindergarten through sixth grade and 81.3 percent are students of color. The school had its initial contract renewed in 1996⁸.

Charles Ellis Montessori Academy in Savannah, Georgia is showing "improvement" for 1993-96. The summary concludes, over four years, that student achievement has improved at third grade on both the IOWA tests of Basic Skills and the Curriculum Based Assessments. Also, students in fifth grade have improved in reading, math, science, health, and writing. The school serves 353 students in pre-kindergarten through sixth grade. Approximately 50 percent of the student population are of color⁹.

Student achievement at **Cherry Creek Academy** in Englewood, Colorado has shown strong national percentile rank improvements. On average, students in third and fourth grade have moved into the upper 25 percent in the nation in language skills and mathematics as measured by the IOWA Tests of Basic Skills administered in May of 1996 and again in April of 1997. Students in kindergarten through second grade ranked in the upper 10 percent. The school enrolls 385 students in kindergarten through eighth grade and 6 percent are students of color¹⁰.

City Academy in Saint Paul, Minnesota enrolls approximately 60 students between the ages of 16 to 21. All students are given the Tests of Adult Basic Skills (TABE) for reading and math. The results are used to assist the student in the creation of an individual plan with post secondary education as a goal. During the 1996-97 academic year, students (on average) have made at least three years academic gain in both reading and math. City Academy had its initial contract renewed in 1995¹¹.

City on a Hill serves 98 inner-city Boston secondary students; 72 percent are students of color, and 47 percent qualify for free and reduced lunch. The results from the Stanford Achievement Test – Ninth Edition, administered in September of 1996 and again in May of 1997, show that students in ninth grade gained an average of .93 years in reading and 1.5 years in language and mathematics. Students in eleventh grade gained an average of 1.1 years in mathematics and 2.7 years in reading and language¹².

Community Day Charter School in Lawrence, Massachusetts has made academic progress since the school first opened in Fall of 1995. The results from the Metropolitan Achievement Test – Seventh Edition in Fall of 1995 and Spring of 1996 show that students in grades two, three, and four increased an average of 1.5 grade levels; in Fall of 1996 to Spring of 1997, students increased an average of 1.3 grade levels. The school serves 132 students in kindergarten through fifth grade; 70 percent are students of color and 69 percent qualify for free and reduced lunch¹³.

Community of Peace Academy in Saint Paul, Minnesota enrolls 260 students in kindergarten through eighth grade and 94 percent of the student population are of color. An external evaluator found that math scores and complete battery scores "increased significantly" for students who had attended the school for two years as measured by the Metropolitan Achievement Test – Seventh Edition, administered in Fall of 1995, Spring of 1996, and Spring of 1997¹⁴.

Excel Charter Academy in Grand Rapids, Michigan serves 430 students in kindergarten through seventh grade and 26 percent are students of color. All students were tested with the Metropolitan Achievement Test – Seventh Edition in Fall of 1996 and again in Spring of 1997. The results show that students made an average gain of 1.3 years in reading, language, and math during that time frame¹⁵.

Fenton Avenue Charter School has come a long way from its reputation as a “hellhole” school. The “conversion” school has one of the largest charter enrollment rates at 1294 students in kindergarten through sixth grade. The majority of the school’s population is students of color (97.5 percent) with over 95 percent of the students qualifying for free and reduced meals. One of the school’s initial goals was to increase scores on the California Tests of Basic Skills (CTBS) and Aprenda (for Spanish speaking students) by five percentile points. This goal has been accomplished in many grades and subjects. A comparison of CTBS scores in 1993-94 and those for 1995-96 shows an increase in grades one through five for math and in grades one, three, four, and five in reading and language. A comparison of the same years for Aprenda scores shows an increase in grades one, two, three, four, and six in math; in grades one, two, three, and four in reading; and in grades one, two, three, and six in language. In addition, several areas showed “marked improvements,” nearly reaching or exceeding the 50th percentile in grades four and five in CTBS math; grades one and two in Aprenda reading; grade one in Aprenda math; and grades one through three in Aprenda language. Fenton was named one of “California’s Most Distinguished Schools” for outstanding performance¹⁶.

Midway Elementary in Alpharetta, Georgia serves 550 students in kindergarten through fifth grade and 20 percent are students of color. Student achievement scores by grade increased or remained constant from 1995-97 as measured by the IOWA Tests of Basic Skills. In addition, the number of students scoring at the remedial level (below the 25th percentile) has decreased by more than 10 percent¹⁷.

Minnesota New Country in Le Sueur, Minnesota serves 94 students and one percent are students of color. An independent evaluation team noted that students’ test scores “slightly” improved on the Stanford Achievement Test – Ninth Edition administered during the 1994-95, 1995-96, and 1996-97 school year. Overall reading and math scores varied by student. The majority (75 percent) of students’ reading scores remained the same or improved since 1995. Seventy-six percent of students’ math scores remained the same or improved since 1995. Minnesota New Country had its initial contract renewed in 1997¹⁸.

Many students at **New Visions School** in Minneapolis had individual education plans and behavioral problems in previous schools. The school serves 180 students in kindergarten through eighth grade, 75 percent are students of color, and 80 percent qualify for free and reduced lunch. One of the school's missions is to educate students with readiness skill deficits including developmental delays, reading difficulties, and various forms of learning disabilities. Over the last five years, students (on average) have gained more than one year on the Slosson Oral Reading (a measure of student's word recognition) and Gates-MacGinitie Reading Test (a measure of a student's vocabulary and comprehension). New Visions School had its initial contract renewed in 1997¹⁹.

Pueblo School for the Arts and Sciences (PSAS) in Pueblo, Colorado enrolls 416 students in kindergarten through twelfth grade; 50 percent are students of color, and 44 percent are eligible for free lunch. All students in grades nine, 10, 11, and 12 are required to participate in the ACT Portfolio program for math, science, and language arts. Work samples for the portfolio are regular assignments scored by ACT readers (using ACT Portfolio Holistic Rating). Ninety-one percent of PSAS students with two years longitudinal data have made "highly significant improvement" (at least two standard errors higher than the previous year) in science. Fifty-seven percent made "highly significant improvement" or "significant improvement" (between 1 and 2 standard errors higher than the previous year) in language arts and 25 percent made "significant improvement" in math. PSAS had its initial contract renewed in 1997 by unanimous vote from the District 60 Board of Education²⁰.

Before converting to charter status, **SABIS International Charter School** was one of the lowest performing schools in the district in Springfield, Massachusetts. Sixty-two percent of the students scored below grade level when the school opened in 1995. Students in grades two through eight were pre-tested with the IOWA Test of Basic Skills in September of 1996 and post-tested in April of 1997. The results show that students made an average gain of 1.64 years during that time frame. At the close of the second year, 62 percent of the students tested at or above grade level. The school enrolls 750 students in kindergarten through ninth grade; 61 percent are students of color and 54 percent qualify for free and reduced lunch and breakfast²¹.

Sequoia School in Mesa, Arizona serves 970 students in kindergarten through twelfth grade. Ten percent of the student population are of color. The school's mission is to "improve academic achievement by providing academic alternatives for specific student populations who are not achieving their potential." Students in grades three through 10 gained an average of 1.2 years on the Stanford Achievement Test - Ninth Edition administered in October 1996 and March 1997²².

Sonoma Charter School in Sonoma, California enrolls 222 students in kindergarten through eighth grade and 28 percent are students of color. In the Stanford Achievement Test administered in April 1996, 92.3 percent of students achieved an above average or average score in reading comprehension and 94.8 percent scored average or above average in mathematics. This compares with an 80.25 average or above average results in reading comprehension and 87.75 percent for mathematics on SAT tests in 1995²³.

Vanguard Charter Academy in Wyoming, Michigan enrolls 373 students in kindergarten through sixth grade and three percent are students of color. In the Fall of 1996, first through third grade students tested, on average, at or below grade level in every subject on the Metropolitan Achievement Test – Seventh Edition. In the Spring of 1997, first through third grade students made, on average, a one year academic gain; fourth and fifth grade students made, on average, 1.36 years academic gain²⁴.

West Houston Charter School in Texas serves a total of 120 students in the seventh, eighth, and ninth grades. Approximately 41 percent of the students are classified as “at-risk,” 37 percent are identified as Special Education, and 32 percent are students of color. To measure student academic growth, all students were administered the Wide Range Achievement Test – Third Edition prior to the beginning and at the end of the 1996-97 school year. Approximately 89 percent of the students demonstrated at least one year of academic growth. The average reading growth was 1.4 years, the math growth was 1.38 years, and the spelling growth was .85 years²⁵.

These 21 schools administered at least two rounds of the same tests and appeared to be making academic gains. Nine schools did not send enough comparable data from one year to the next to determine whether academic gains were made. One school provided no data. Not all of these schools have positive results for all grade levels and tests.

Seven charters in the group have had their contracts renewed because of improved student achievement and six schools received an award for outstanding performance. Academy Charter School, Pueblo School for the Arts and Sciences, and Core Knowledge were designated as “Commissioner’s Challenger Schools” in Colorado. Academy Charter School received the “John J. Irwin Colorado School of Excellence” award two years in a row. Open Charter School and Fenton Avenue Charter School received the “California’s Most Distinguished Schools” award for their success in meeting student needs, adopting and applying a challenging curriculum, and incorporating the staff, parents, and community into the school’s mission.

Charter schools are still young. Most of the charters have only one or two years of data. More data will come in the years ahead. As districts and states consider ways to proceed, they may wish to review material produced by the Colorado Department of Education. One of their publications appears, as of this date, to be the single most comprehensive statewide evaluation report on charter schools. The study reports on the characteristics, status, and student achievement data of Colorado charter schools²⁶.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

While this report cannot be considered definitive, the results are encouraging. Charter schools can indeed improve achievement of inner city and rural students. At the same time, it is important for charters and their sponsors to carefully consider what is meant by the phrase "accountability for results." Before granting a charter, the sponsor and those proposing the school should agree on what will be the school's measurable goals, what assessments will be used, and what will be acceptable levels of student performance. Tension about charter renewal is reduced for the school and the sponsor when both have contributed to indicators of success. And most important, students are best served when these agreements are clear and made prior to the school's creation.

A wise person once noted that "the problem with good ideas is that they inevitably degenerate into hard work." The exact nature of accountability for results needs much more discussion. In some cases, charters are expected to meet both state and district performance standards (i.e. charter school students, like other public school students, are expected to pass state mandated tests prior to graduation. Charter students may also be expected to meet district level performance standards).

Often it is not clear what the required standard is for improved achievement. Should charter students be expected to make ten percent progress over a period of three years? Twenty percent progress? Should they be expected to do better than other public school students? And what is better? Should their absolute performance be higher at the end of a certain period? Should their rate of improvement be more rapid? This report reaches no conclusions on these questions. But these, and related questions should be considered prior to granting a charter.

Our research suggests that it is important to be careful in making comparisons between achievement of charter school students and other public school students. The characteristics of students sometimes are quite different. In one state, charter proponents pointed out that the charter school students in their first year had among the districts highest average test scores. However, there were some demographic differences between the charter students and other public school students in the district. In another state, charter skeptics pointed to the fact that charter students tended to score lower on statewide assessments than the state's average public school student. But the charter students were much more likely to be from a low-income family, not speak English at home, or be a student of color, than the average student in the state. Moreover, the achievement of students at charter schools, especially in the fall of their first year, probably has more to do with their experiences in previous schools than the impact of the charter school.

We have several additional recommendations for sponsors and charters. These recommendations are based on the results of this study and input from several leaders and experts in the charter school movement.

Issues for Sponsors

1. *Insist on at least some clear, measurable goals for the school before approving the charter proposal.* This is a mutual responsibility between charter developers and sponsors. In many cases, the charter arrangement creates a new kind of relationship between schools and sponsors.
2. *Agree on the tools used to measure student progress before approving the charter proposal.* Remain open to several possibilities and to multiple measures, so that the sponsor and the school are not just relying on standardized, nationally norm-referenced tests. Consider sharing assessment tools the sponsor has found especially useful.
3. *Insist on baseline data.* When possible, the sponsor should help the charter gather baseline data. For example, if the sponsor is a local district, it can be very helpful for a key central office administrator to ask other local public schools to supply information about students to the charter school which now enrolls the students.
4. *Consider using the accountability tools and models developed with charter schools for other public schools the sponsor supervises.*

Issues for Charter Schools

1. *Develop a clear and informative mission statement.* Start by asking the following questions: 1) What ages and grade levels will the school serve? 2) What is the school trying to accomplish? 3) What will make the charter distinctive from others?
2. *Review state charter laws on accountability and state standards.* Some states and districts leave evaluation of learning entirely up to the charter school. Other states require both charter and non-charter public schools to participate in state-mandated assessment.
3. *List realistic and measurable goals and objectives.* In developing the list, contact other charters that have been successful and ask for suggestions.
4. *Keep the list of goals manageable by categorizing and prioritizing goals and objectives.* Also, relate the evaluation to the school's mission.
5. *Keep accountability focused on the program rather than on student, parents, and the community.* Schools need at least some program goals that are measurable.

6. *Think about other issues such as parental satisfaction and involvement, attendance and graduation rates, fiscal management, staff development, etc. Are the goals and objectives realistic and measurable?*
7. *Establish clear criteria of what "success" would look like. Distinguish between the means and outcomes.*
8. *Explore and review the various methods available to measure the selected goals and objectives. Use a variety of methods, both standardized test and performance-based assessments, to measure the different dimensions of student learning. No single test can provide a full picture of a student's progress.*
9. *Develop an annual report that is made available to both the state board of education and the general public. Report and share results with students, parents, as well as the local newspapers or radio stations.*
10. *Don't exclude negative results in the annual report. Negative results can help the school improve. The report should include clear, open, and honest information about the school, test results, and any other samples of student progress.*
11. *Consider working with a university based evaluation expert, a private evaluation consultant, or a state department based evaluation authority. Such people can provide important, valuable technical assistance. They also can provide important objectivity, giving the charter proposal credibility when the proposal is being reviewed, and when the evaluation is presented to a sponsor as part of a request for renewal.*

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Stella Cheung is the Research Assistant at the Center for School Change, University of Minnesota. She has conducted research and developed a progress report on Arizona charter schools for the Goldwater Institute for Public Policy. She was named a Woodrow Wilson Fellow in 1996 and completed the Woodrow Wilson Program in Public Policy and International Affairs at Princeton University. She received a B.A. in Family Resources and Human Development from Arizona State University and is pursuing her M.A. at the Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs at the University of Minnesota. She has facilitated sessions on charter school governance and special education for the U.S. Department of Education. Her concentration at the Humphrey Institute is in policy analysis and program evaluation.

Mary Ellen Murphy is an evaluation and planning consultant who works to improve the effectiveness of organizations. Her evaluation and planning work in education builds upon her experiences as a secondary, social studies teacher. She received a B.S. in Education and an M.A. at the Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs, University of Minnesota. She provides technical assistance in evaluation to Minnesota charter schools for the Center for School Change, University of Minnesota. For 14 years, she has evaluated programs, using approaches that focus on outcomes and ensure use of evaluation. She has worked for a wide variety of organizations including the Minnesota Department of Children, Families and Learning, Saint Paul Foundation, Blandin Foundation, W.K. Kellogg Foundation, Pew Charitable Trusts, and a wide range of non-profit organizations. She has operated her own consulting business in Minneapolis, Minnesota for the past eight years. Recently, she began training community-based organizations to evaluate their programs using methods that reflect the community they serve.

Joe Nathan directs the Center for School Change at the University of Minnesota. He has been an award winning public school teacher and administrator. The National Governor's Association hired Nathan to direct its research project which produced: *Time for Results: The Governors' 1991 Report on Education*. Nathan was elected president of the PTA at Saint Paul's (public) Horace Mann Elementary School, where all three of his children attended school. He was elected to the Minnesota State PTA Board. He currently serves on the site council of the public school where his daughter attends. Nathan has written three books and edited another one. The American School Board Journal cited his *Micro-Myths: Exploring the Limits of Computers*, as among the "10 best books written about education" in 1986 and *Charter Schools: Creating Hope and Opportunity in American Education* as among the "seven best books about education" published in 1996. Nathan earned a B.A. at Carleton College, an M.A. and Ph.D. from the University of Minnesota. He writes a weekly column for the *Saint Paul Pioneer Press*, *Rochester Post-Bulletin*, and *Duluth News Tribune*. The *Wall Street Journal*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *Atlanta Constitution*, *Minneapolis Tribune*, *Detroit News*, and *Philadelphia Inquirer* have published "op ed" columns he wrote.

Appendix A

Date

Name of State Department Official
State Department Official
State Department of Education
Street Address
City, State, Zip Code
Phone Number

Dear State Official,

Thank you for your leadership assistance in the charter school movement. Currently, the *Center for School Change* is conducting a national review on charter schools and the issues of governance and student achievement. Many people have asked for advice about these issues. Your input in this matter is very important and we hope you will help answer these questions. Please nominate three to five charter schools in your state that have been successful in improving student achievement and have a well developed evaluation system. Please also suggest three to five schools which you believe have a well developed governance system. You may include the same schools in both lists. Also, could you please tell us which, if any, charters in your state have been renewed by their sponsor?

As you may know, the *Center for School Change* is a program of the Hubert H. Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs, located at the University of Minnesota. The mission of the Center is to increase student achievement, raise graduation rates, improve student attitudes toward learning and their schools, and strengthen the working relationships between educators and the broader community.

Please fax or mail your responses by **Friday October 3rd, 1997** to: *Center for School Change*, 234 Humphrey Center, 301-19th Avenue South, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55455; Fax (612)625-0104. We will provide you a complimentary copy of this report as soon as it is available. If you have any questions or comments please contact Joe Nathan or Stella Cheung at (612)626-1834. Thank you for your cooperation and assistance.

Sincerely,

Joe Nathan

Stella Cheung

Please fax or mail this form by Friday October 3rd, 1997 to: *Center for School Change*,
234 Humphrey Center, 301-19th Avenue South, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55455; Fax
(612)625-0104.

Part I: Please nominate three to five charter schools in your state that have been successful in improving student achievement and have a well developed evaluation system.

Name and Address of School

Name and Address of School

Name and Address of School

Name and Address of School

Name and Address of School

Part II: Please nominate three to five charter schools in your state that have a well developed governance system. You may include the same schools in both lists.

Name and Address of School

Name and Address of School

Name and Address of School

Name and Address of School

Name and Address of School

Part III: Which charters in your state, if any, have been renewed by their sponsors?

Appendix B

Date

Name of charter school director

Name of charter school

Street address

City, State and Zip

Phone number

Fax number

Dear charter school director,

Currently, the *Center for School Change* is conducting a national review on charter schools and the issues of governance and student achievement. (*Name of charter school*) was nominated by the (*State*) Department of Education as having a well developed evaluation system. Many people have asked us advice about this issue.

We would like to speak with you about your evaluation system. Your input is very important. I will be contacting your charter on (*date*), between the hours of (*time*). The interview should take no longer than 15 minutes. Below are the following interview questions:

- 1) What evaluation methods does your charter use to measure student success in academic areas? What results do you have? Please send us a copy of your evaluation methods and any annual/evaluation report(s) you have produced.
- 2) What additional methods might be useful in measuring student success? What other areas do you want to measure but haven't found an appropriate/effective way to measure?

Thank you for your assistance. If you have any questions or comments, please contact Joe Nathan or Stella Cheung at (612)626-1834. We look forward to speaking with you soon.

Sincerely,

Joe Nathan

Stella Cheung



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